

A SHORT SKETCH OF THE
GIRLS' FRIENDLY SOCIETY

1893

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A Short Sketch of the Girls' Friendly Society.

IT has often been asserted that women cannot combine, and our supposed inability to associate ourselves has been urged as a sort of reproach to the whole sex. It must, indeed, be owned that women have been more slow than men to realize the value of united effort, which has in recent years become, whether for good or for ill, such a mighty power. This reproach, however, is now scarcely justified, for coalitions of women are day by day becoming larger and more numerous.

The Girls' Friendly Society already numbers in the United States about 10,000 Members, including Probationers and Candidates; upwards of 1,700 Working Associates, and more than 1,300 Honorary Associates.

The *Objects* of the Society are :

1. To bind together in one society Churchwomen as Associates, and girls and young women as Members, for mutual help (religious and secular), for sympathy and prayer.
2. To encourage purity of life, dutifulness to parents, faithfulness to employers, and thrift.
3. To provide the privileges of the Society for its Members, wherever they may be, by giving them an introduction from one Branch to another.

The *Central Rules* of the G. F. S. stand as follows :

I. Associates to be communicants of the Church (no such restriction being made as to Members), and the organization of the Society to follow as much as possible that of the Church, being Diocesan and Parochial.

II. Associates and Members to contribute annually to the funds — the former at the rate of *not less* than five cents a month, and the latter of *not less* than one cent a month.

III. No girl who has not borne a virtuous character to be admitted as a Member ; such character being lost, the Member to forfeit her card.

Its *Motto* :

“Bear ye one another’s burdens.”

The modes of mutual help are many, and new channels of work are continually being opened. Sympathy, fostered by increasing knowledge of the lives and the trials of others, and mutual intercession are bonds to draw Associates and Members into heartfelt union. The young, the busy, the sick, those who cannot labor much for their fellows, may help at least by their prayers to make earth’s rough places plain, to bring the kingdom of God on earth. And, remembering the gracious promise to the “two who shall agree” in the same request, we can but look for great blessings in response to the prayers offered by thousands pledged to a daily intercession. *Honorary* Associates need not undertake any active work in the Society beyond giving it their prayers and such help towards its funds as may be in their power. *Working* Associates enroll and take charge of Members, and carry on the various undertakings of the Society.

Not that *Members* have no work to do. Friendship should be mutual service. Their share is most important and valuable, especially that of *Senior Members*, who help to carry on many branches of work, visit new Members and those who

are sick, help in the libraries and in the rapidly growing work involved in the care of *Candidates*.

Girls may be enrolled as Members at the age of twelve. Those whom it is desired to enlist before that age are received as *Candidates*. They pay no subscription, but are given a card with texts and a special prayer, and are taught the objects and the work of the Society, to which, if their conduct is satisfactory, they will be admitted when old enough. *Members*, on admission, receive each, besides the badge of the Society, a *Card*, on which is printed the G. F. S. prayer, and a small *Guide-book*, in which quarterly payments of dues are received by the Secretary of her Branch or by her Associate. The possession of the *Card* and duly received *Guide-book* proves a girl's right to the privileges of the Society.

That the G. F. S. seeks to supersede the authority of parent or employer is expressly contradicted by its inculcation of *dutifulness* to parents and *faithfulness* to employers, while *thrift*, the wise management of resources, closes the door to many temptations, and makes the blessedness of almsgiving and help to others possible even with but slender earnings.

The third Central Rule limits the field of the Society's work, and defines what it does *not* undertake to do. The G. F. S. has no share in Rescue Work. It is an association of those who purpose, by God's grace, to stand fast themselves and to uphold their sisters.

This Society stands upon a different basis from that of other organizations which have as their object the moral and social advancement of working girls. The Associates of the Girls' Friendly Society must be communicants of the Episcopal Church; this is the *sine qua non* of their admission, although there is no such restriction with regard to the Members, who, if they are girls of good character, are gladly welcomed from any religious body. But this requisite for Associates stamps the G. F. S. as distinctively a religious and a Church Society,

in which the teaching of the Church is designed to be carried out. Therefore, besides the industrial and literary classes which are found to be useful in many Branches, the girls become interested in missionary and other benevolent work, and in most parishes the G. F. S. is an important auxiliary to the work of the Church. In order to realize the amount and variety of work the girls are doing, one has only to read the reports of different Branches given in the Girls' Friendly Magazine (published monthly by the Massachusetts Diocesan Organization G. F. S. A., Boston, Mass.). Then, too, the Branches generally have a regular meeting of obligation, more or less frequent, according to circumstances. This is opened in the chapel, with a brief service by the Chaplain, followed by a short practical address, and the admission of new Members and Associates. A hymn and collect close the service, after which all adjourn to the Guild Room, where whatever business may be on hand is transacted. In most Branches there is a Corporate Communion once a year, or at more frequent stated times, which becomes a very strong bond of union between Members and Associates.

This religious life is a peculiar feature of the G. F. S. which possibly tends to limit its membership, but in this high standard of our Society lies its real and enduring strength. This influence gives the Members a living interest in the Church, and helps them to feel that they have some part in her work; and this consciousness that they are giving as well as receiving is of itself a strength to them.

Then, again, each Branch of the G. F. S. is not a separate unit; it is, as its name implies, only a small part of a great whole, and herein lies its advantage over merely parochial Guilds. The organization of the Society follows Church lines. The Bishop gives his sanction to the Diocesan Organization within his jurisdiction, and the Rector is the head of the Branch in his parish. Indeed, until its network

is completed by a representation in every parish, the work of the Society cannot be perfectly done, for it is by being able to commend its Members, wherever they may be, to Associates who will take an interest in them that it carries out one chief object of its existence. In the Festal Seasons of the Church, the various Branches give entertainments, inviting neighboring Branches to join them, thus establishing kindly intercourse among the Members. Associates and Members stand together in ranks, loyal to the Society, and careful to avoid any spirit of clique or any limiting of their sympathies to a little circle within their own Branch, or even their own Diocese.

“If any one should say, ‘What is the one real object of all this vast machinery and organization? We see that it is large and far-reaching, and possibly it may be useful; but what is, after all, the soul and spirit of the whole thing—that which will be as salt to keep this unwieldy mass from deteriorating?’ We would say at once, that our Society was started not for secular ends alone, but to assist, if ever so humbly, our younger and far more hard-worked sisters to follow in the steps of our one Master, by showing them how Christian women can ‘love one another.’ We would answer, in words which have been already used in pleading for the national character of our work, ‘The Girls’ Friendly Society aims at preserving purity: not merely by the outward aids of help and protection (though these are freely used in a very practical manner), but by endeavoring to awaken in the minds of women of all classes a sense of the preciousness of that purity in the sight of God; by seeking to band women together to strive for the honor of womanhood, because womanhood has been consecrated *by* Him, and should be consecrated *to* Him; by proclaiming boldly and fearlessly that virtue is of no class, and impossible to no class; and that in this matter all are concerned, not only for themselves, but for others.’

“For when we invite to join the Girls’ Friendly Society we

do not merely say, ‘Come, because you have need of us,’ but, ‘Come, because we have need of you. We want your help in the work, your witness as Christian women for purity and faithfulness and truth; not only as servants in the household, but as dutiful daughters in the home, as conscientious workers in the shop and workroom, the factory and the school — wherever, in short, you, as women, are doing your part in the work of the world.’

“And because we hold that Love is the only key that can open hearts, strengthening them in the fight against evil and temptation, therefore we ask all in our Society to bear each other’s burden — the older and more educated to help the younger, the experienced to guide the inexperienced, the leisured to rest the toilers, the young and healthful to cheer the sick, the possessors of many gifts to share them with those who have few; but the gifts of love and friendship and sympathy are shared by all alike — not only to be *given* to all, but to be *taken* from all: and it is this which has made the success of our Society; this that has caused it to be as a household word to many hearts; and this that has won for it, as we humbly think, the Divine blessing.

“Whenever the spirit of Love shall die out of the Girls’ Friendly Society, whenever this better and nobler ideal of womanhood shall cease to be set before it, whenever its work shall tend to foster self-righteousness, or self-interest, or pride, then it will fall, and it were better that it should. But, till then, we claim for it, as a *national Society*, the help of all who can join it, and all who can work for it.”